



## Early Literacy, Family Engagement, and Cultural Competence: District Priorities in Clark County, Nevada

LUCY KEATON

*Engaged families and community members, along with culturally competent and data-savvy teachers and principals, are key goals in a district with a burgeoning English language learner population.*

The guest editor of this issue of *VUE*, Rosann Tung, interviewed Lucy Keaton, appointed in February 2013 as the first assistant superintendent for the English Language Learner program at the Clark County (Nevada) School District (CCSD), which includes Las Vegas and contains more than half of Nevada's public schools. Previously, Keaton was principal of Hewetson Elementary

School, cited by CCSD as a model elementary school for other schools to emulate.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the interview is to share CCSD's approach to raising teachers' cultural competency, engaging families, and promoting early literacy in elementary schools.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.lasvegassun.com/news/2013/feb/12/school-district-names-new-assistant-superintendent/#axzz2X81MwNBX](http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2013/feb/12/school-district-names-new-assistant-superintendent/#axzz2X81MwNBX).

*Lucy Keaton is assistant superintendent for the English Language Learner program at the Clark County (Nevada) School District.*

## HEWETSON ELEMENTARY: A SUCCESSFUL MODEL

**Q** Can you tell me about the success of the English language learners in Hewetson Elementary School when you were principal?

**A** My school had a total enrollment of 950 plus students. It was a K–5 school, and we were about 87 percent Hispanic. Of the 87 percent Hispanic population, approximately 70 to 75 percent of those were ELL. The majority of our students came to us with very few literacy skills. They had to learn English.

All the teachers on campus required a lot of training on how to deliver instruction that was meaningful and comprehensible for each individual student. I spent a lot of time training my teachers in literacy. I had a lot of parent involvement, because I knew that was another key piece for school

improvement. I also did a lot of training with cultural competence and worked at eliminating existing biases relating to second language learners. I wanted to make sure that we knew exactly where the students were and what they needed, so we were very data driven on a weekly to monthly basis.

As a staff, we needed to learn how to analyze and interpret data. We started by looking at the current information and identifying effective interventions to meet the needs of every child. Another critical component was ensuring that every child's progress was consistently monitored to confirm effective instruction. All of those pieces were very, very important to turn our school around from below 10 percent proficiency in reading up to 80 percent proficiency in reading. In math we also demonstrated significant gains, increasing from 50 percent proficiency to 90 percent proficiency in third, fourth, and fifth grades.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS (ELLS) IN NEVADA AND CLARK COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT (CCSD)

- Nevada is the state with the highest percentage (31 percent) of children whose first language is not English.
- From 1998 to 2008, the number of ELLs in Nevada increased by over 200 percent, nearly four times the national average.
- Nevada is one of only eight states that do not fund ELL education.
- Immigrant families of Nevada's children are 73 percent from Latin America, 21 percent from Asia, 4 percent from Europe, and 2 percent from Africa.
- Of Nevada's 626 public schools in 2010–2011, 341 are in CCSD; in 2011, CCSD served 71 percent of Nevada's ELLs.
- More than 30 percent of CCSD students are identified as ELLs.
- In February 2013, CCSD identified 94,771 ELL students, with 53,073 actively enrolled in services.
- Eighty percent of CCSD's ELL students are from the United States.
- In 2011, only 42 percent of CCSD's third-grade ELLs and only 10 percent of eighth-grade ELLs met the standard in reading.

Source: S. D. Horsford, C. Mokhtar, and C. Sampson, *Nevada's English Language Learner Population: A Review of Enrollment, Outcomes, and Opportunities*, Las Vegas, NV: Lincy Institute, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (2013). Available at [www.unlv.edu/news-story/research-report-nevadas-english-language-learner-population-review-enrollment-outcomes-an](http://www.unlv.edu/news-story/research-report-nevadas-english-language-learner-population-review-enrollment-outcomes-an).

## TOP PRIORITIES FOR ELLS IN CLARK COUNTY

**Q** In your current role as assistant superintendent of the English Language Learner (ELL) program, you've been going through a strategic planning process for the district. What are your top priorities?

**A** My first priority, obviously – if you look at our numbers and you look at the way that our ELLs are achieving throughout the district – is to start from the very beginning, with early literacy, just like we did at Hewetson. At this point I am thrilled that at both the state and district level, they, too, support the importance of early literacy and have allocated additional funds for Pre-K and full day kindergarten programs at schools with high ELL populations.

I would also love to have summer language camps that prepare students and families for the new school experience. The idea is that students identified as entering critical transition grades such as kindergarten, sixth, and ninth grades, would be required to participate in a two- to three-week session that could proactively address possible difficulties faced during these transitional years. The program would focus on equipping ELL students and their families with the tools and expectations they need to increase student achievement. The camps would help families get better acquainted with our school system by establishing a mandatory home-school connection that would promote less frustration and anxiety, often experienced by students, parents, and even teachers over the course of their schooling.

Another priority for the department is to strengthen core reading and math instruction in schools. Our focus will be to teach teachers how to integrate strategies that will help students simultaneously develop language and learn content subject matter. Our department will provide highly

qualified ELL instructional coaches who will assist schools' capacity to increase academic achievement.

### Instruction: Literacy and Alignment

As I said earlier, our key to success at Hewetson was concentrating on literacy. First, we provided training to ensure delivery of intense core instruction. Next, we created a wide reading program that encouraged students to read, read, and read. Each child read, probably, an average of a hundred books a year. We provided students with books of different genres from fiction to nonfiction, from your typical easy reader to chapter books, to increase fluency. Some of our fifth-graders were leaving our campus reading at ninth- or tenth-grade level, at least. We identified a measuring tool that was an essential monitoring piece. Eventually, our math scores also improved as a direct result of the gains in reading.

I was able to lead the teachers into creating a professional learning community (PLC), making sure that it was all about children. All of our decisions were made based on the premise that if it was good for kids and everybody agreed on it, we would all do it consistently. Ultimately, through the work of the PLCs, all grade levels were all in alignment and instruction and interventions were consistent. Anything that we did was always from first to fifth grade. We were making the right decisions for all children.

### Family Engagement

**Q** You mentioned parent involvement as being key. Can you say more about how you engaged families in the school community?

**A** At the beginning we had to work hard to make the parents feel welcomed and reassure them that it was a safe environment. We communicated the message that we were there to

educate all the children, and we needed them to be part of that process. We hosted several special events to try to draw the parents into the building. We held literacy night, math night, and science fairs, where we encouraged and taught our parents strategies to use at home.

Having a better rapport made it easier for the parents to see the urgency of the academics. The parents would make sure that the homework was completed and that nightly reading was accomplished.

### Cultural Competence

**Q** What surprised you in your transition from school principal to the central office?

**A** What was surprising to me is how vocal the stakeholders were regarding the urgency and the need for our ELL students to achieve. The political part of it has been a learning experience for me. Also, the training that urgently needs to happen with cultural competence. I feel it's of utmost importance that we start changing that sensitivity toward the ELL students and that these students have immense potential.

**Q** So there is cultural competence training in your strategic plan?

**A** Yes. That would probably be our first priority. Naturally, we need to start working on the early literacy and the parent involvement, but it's so hard to prioritize, because they're all so important to start the trajectory of success.

When I started at that school, I had many, many teachers I had to talk to about, "These are your children." A lot of the attitudes were, "Well, they can't learn. The parents don't care. They never come to school. They've got so many problems." One of the things I emphasized was that we were going to

start changing teachers' mindset and all students would be held to the same high standard and expectation.

**Q** What kind of cultural competence do principals need?

**A** Principals need to understand the distinct needs of English language learners. The site administrator sets the tone and the culture in the building, therefore a positive attitude starts with the principal.

### SCHOOLS CAN'T DO IT ALONE

**Q** There's an increasing recognition that districts and schools can't do everything alone – who are your major current and future partners?

**A** There are quite a few community members who are saying, "Lucy, we want to support you in any way that we can." One of the things that would be most helpful is for outside community people to really advocate for parents and families to get involved with their child's education. Within the district, we have taken the stance of shared responsibility in the education of our ELLs. Our department has formed many partnerships and has started to collaborate with key stakeholders in an effort to increase student achievement.

We try to communicate throughout our community the importance of being in touch with what's going on with your child at any level. Where might they be struggling? Learning about possible tutoring available before and after school or during the summer or something on a Saturday – it depends on what the schools are offering. It's really about giving parents information, because once we can get a lot of parent involvement, I think it just gives the principal that much more support and ability to communicate what the expectations are on their campuses.